

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

Select Committee on Children Testimony, March 1, 2011

*SB 1044: An Act Requiring the Department of Children and Families to
Conduct Abuse or Neglect Investigations of Youth Arrested for Prostitution*

Good morning Representative Urban, Senator Musto and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Representative Wood, who is from our district in Norwalk.

My name is Mallory Ham and I am a member of the Center for Youth Leadership, which is based at Brien McMahon High School. Joining me is Roberto Ceja, who is also a member of the Center.

Ten months ago, we were proud to be among a handful of people who were asked to attend the bill signing ceremony for the *Safe Harbor Act for Exploited Children*. Today, on behalf of the 226 student activists at the Center for Youth Leadership, we are here to urge you to support of SB 1044, which would require the Department of Children and Families to conduct abuse or neglect investigations of children and teens arrested for prostitution.

Although I have never been trafficked, nor have any of my friends, we do know students at our school who have run away from home, been thrown out of their home and/or experienced sexual abuse at home, all of which are huge red flags for teenagers who are lured into prostitution.

We have also volunteered with runaway and throwaway teens in two safe houses in Fairfield County. We raise awareness of human trafficking and child prostitution in Connecticut by leading two public awareness activities a month in lower Fairfield County. We piloted an eight-week trafficking curriculum at our school with Love 146, an advocacy group in New Haven. Love 146 will return to our school in the spring, and we are working with the group to introduce the curriculum to other high schools in Fairfield County. And in the coming weeks we will start an outreach project that will take us to truck stops along I-95 to educate truckers about trafficking.

While we were pleased with the passage of the safe harbor legislation, we were haunted by several questions, not the least of which is the one addressed by SB 1044. Granted, there are a ton of questions: *How many beds are available in Connecticut for teens who have been trafficked? Which staff at which state agency have been trained to address the unique needs of these teens? And are attempts made to reunify the teens with their families?*

But the question that is raised most often by our members is: *Who is being held responsible for the circumstances that lead teens my age to hit the streets in the first place?* In fact, our members raised it again just two weeks ago with news that two men from our hometown of Norwalk were arrested for transporting girls across state lines for the purpose of prostitution. They took two girls from Norwalk to Bridgeport; Bridgeport to Hartford; Hartford back to Norwalk; and eventually into Massachusetts.

We know that confidentiality laws prohibit the general public from knowing much about these teens, but don't you ever wonder what happens to them after they've been detained by the police for prostitution? We know from the Center for Children's Advocacy that among these teens are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students who have been kicked out of their homes after "coming out"; adolescent boys who are not allowed into family homeless shelters; teens who are victims of child sex abuse and trafficking; teens like me and Roberto. Sure, some are running from themselves, but more often than not they are running from homes that are violent and indifferent to their needs.

According to the National Incidence Studies of Children, one out of every three runaway or throwaway teens is lured into prostitution within 48 hours of hitting the streets. One out of every three. We're talking about teens as young as thirteen, which the University of Pennsylvania and Shared Hope International say is the average age for entry into prostitution in America.

We are talking about a group of teens that is all but invisible to the general public. It's almost like they've become refugees from their own families and the state agencies that should be caring for them; a class of people that no one is responsible for; that no one is being held accountable for. This has to stop.

That's why SB 1044 is so important. We know that a lot is asked of the Department of Children and Families, but we think this is a no-brainer. A DCF investigation within 24 hours of receiving a police report that a teen has been detained for prostitution could reveal important clues to the teens' actions. It could even lead to holding someone responsible for the circumstances that led to the teens' working the streets.

We know the governor has complicated things by cutting \$1 million for homeless youth services from DCF's budget; funding that we believe should be restored immediately. But we still urge you to support SB 1044, and to work with the Department of Children and Families, the Center for Children's Advocacy, Love 146 and other groups to identify a strategy that addresses the abuse and neglect experienced by teens from one of Connecticut's more invisible groups of people.

Thank you very much.

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